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U.S. excoriates Papandreou's spy comments

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WASHINGTON — The administration, with calculated fury, yesterday labeled "outrageous" and "irresponsible" the claim of Greek Prime Minister Andreas Papandreou that a Korean airliner destroyed by Soviet fighters last year was on a spying mission for the Central Intelligence Agency.

"There is not the slightest evidence for a claim of a spy mission," said a State Department spokesman, Alan Romberg, "and any such claim can only be termed irresponsible." He said the International Civil Aviation Organization investigated the attack and "gave no support to the Soviet disinformation effort."

A Pentagon spokesman, Michael Burch, called the remarks "a completely outrageous statement. ... I believe that they know better."

Mr. Papandreou was quoted by the Associated Press as saying Wednesday, "It's a given fact that the [plane] was on a spy mission for the American CIA, and it really did violate Soviet airspace for clandestine purposes."

A Greek government spokesman said later that Mr. Papandreou's judgment was based on reports in U.S. and British media. The prime minister did not approve the downing of the plane, the spokesman added.

During his three years in office, Mr. Papandreou frequently has criticized the United States and the Western alliance, of which Greece is a member, and has been conciliatory toward the Soviet Union. But on key issues, he also has sustained the alliance, as he did with the renewal of U.S. military-base rights a year ago.

As a result, the United States has been careful to mute its responses to his criticisms.

But the prime minister's remarks regarding the Korean airliner, which was shot down with the loss of 269 lives, brought a bitter response.